

Underwater Noise Pollution: Impacts on Marine Life & Recommendations for International Regulatory Action

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Abstract

Anthropogenic noise is a form of pollution that poses significant threats to marine mammals, fish and other ocean wildlife including displacement, injury and mortality. The use of technologies that produce intense underwater noise pollution may be in breach of Article 194(1) of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea which requires States to take all measures necessary to prevent, reduce and control pollution of the marine environment and Articles 204-206 which require States to assess potentially negative impacts on the environment.

Acoustic energy is not restricted by national boundaries and there is growing consensus that undersea noise pollution should be regulated by responsible international institutions. The Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission in July 2004 issued a strong statement of concern about intense underwater noise stating that there is compelling evidence that marine mammal populations worldwide are potentially threatened especially by intense military sonars and air guns used in geophysical research and oil and gas exploration. They asked that noise exposure standards be included in national and international ocean conservation plans.

The Scientific Committee to ACCOBAMS issued a formal recommendation on "Man-Made Noise" urging extreme caution in using intense acoustic devices and the 2003 meeting of ASCOBANS passed a resolution affirming their commitment to apply the Precautionary Principle to ocean noise.

NATO representatives met with MEP's, scientists and NGO's in October, 2003 to receive petitions signed by 70 environmental groups in Europe and North America, representing memberships of 8.3 million people, and consider requests for regulatory action on underwater noise pollution. NGO's gave a presentation on Intense Underwater Noise Pollution at the Fifth UN Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea in June, 2004 discussing science, legal aspects and political activities urging international regulation of ocean noise. NGO's worldwide are forming an International Coalition for Ocean Noise Management.